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LOS ANGELES TIMES
27 MARCH 1983

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Andropov Assails Reagan on Missiles

President Stirs Broad Debate on Arms Superiority

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WASHINGTON—President Reagan, in calling for the greatest arms buildup in U.S. history, has plunged the nation into an urgent and potentially fateful debate over the relative military strength of this country and its superpower adversary, the Soviet Union.

"On balance," Reagan declared last year, "the Soviets have a definite margin of superiority." And last week, he denounced criticism of his current defense budget as "the same kind of talk that led the democracies to neglect their defenses in the 1930s and invited the tragedy of World War II."

Is it true, however, that the Soviet Union has gained military superiority over the United States? Does Moscow command a superior arsenal of strategic weapons, from continent-spanning ICBMs to nuclear-armed submarines and bombers? What about intermediate-range nuclear weapons, such as the Soviet SS-20s that can easily reach West European targets from the Soviet homeland?

'What Is Superiority?'

Has the Kremlin grown stronger than the United States and its allies in tanks, troops, artillery and other conventional forces as well? If it has, what then? What difference does "superiority" make in the atomic age? Given the undisputed vastness of American military power, would it matter if the Soviets were stronger? Is Reagan's call for heightened defense spending just a call for more "overkill?"

"What in the name of God is strategic superiority?" former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger once demanded in a moment of exhausted frustration. "What is the significance of it—politically, militarily, operationally, at these levels of numbers? What can you do with it?"

The answers to these questions are not simple or clear-cut, and they have far-reaching consequences. They involve questions of national security and survival, and they affect foreign and domestic policy issues that touch the lives of virtually all Americans.

Already, the debate touched off by Reagan's defense buildup has:

—Influenced the content and character of American foreign policy, including the shape of U.S. arms control proposals, this country's relations with its European allies and the temperature of Washington's dealings with the Kremlin.

—Rekindled conflict over defense policy between the government and a fledgling new peace movement, brought such powerful religious leaders as the U.S. Roman Catholic bishops into the fray and stimulated a nationwide campaign for a nuclear freeze.

—Intensified fears that increasingly intricate nuclear weapons systems are themselves a greater threat to peace and human survival than the Soviet forces they were built to deter.

Gone are the days when American nuclear might generally was seen as a positive force in the world.

Eugene V. Rostow, former director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, said President Dwight D. Eisenhower's "nuclear hint"—implicitly threatening to use nuclear weapons—forced an end to the Korean War. And overwhelming U.S. superiority as late as 1962, when the American nuclear arsenal outnumbered the Soviets' by a ratio of 40 to 1, is credited with forcing Moscow to back down during the Cuban missile crisis.

Today, by contrast, large segments of the European and American populations take no comfort from plans for "restoring" the nuclear balance by adding to and improving the U.S. arsenal. Instead of feeling reassured, as they once did, that greater strength makes war less likely, many people now say more weapons make them feel more vulnerable.

Feelings Can't Be Ignored

This psychological element has vastly complicated the problems of developing national security policies, even though many specialists believe that it clouds the basic issues.

As Harold Brown, former President Jimmy Carter's defense secretary, said in an interview: "Reassurance is not more important than deterrence and not of equal importance, either. Reassurance comes from a steady hand in diplomacy, and no American administration in recent years has provided that. As for deterrence, you still need to look at the military balance in assessing it."

Yet policy-makers cannot ignore the way people feel, as Reagan has learned in his uphill battle over his defense budget.

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